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THE SERVANT-GIRL'S POINT OF VIEW.

BY MRS. AMELIA E. BARR, AUTHOR OF "JAN VEDDER'S WIFE,"
"FRIEND OLIVIA," ETC.

A GREAT deal has been said lately on the servant-girl question, always from the mistresses' point of view ; and as no *ex-parte* evidence is conclusive, I offer for the servant-girl side some points that may help to a better understanding of the whole subject.

It is said, on all hands, that servants every year grow more idle, showy, impudent, and independent. The last charge is emphatically true, and it accounts for and includes the others. But then this independence is the necessary result of the world's progress, in which all classes share. Steam has made it easy for families to travel, who, without cheap locomotion, would never go one hundred miles from home. It has also made it easy for servants to go from city to city. When wages are low and service is plenty in one place, a few dollars will carry them to where they are in request.

Fifty years ago very few servants read, or cared to read. They are now the best patrons of a certain class of newspapers ; they see the "Want columns" as well as other people; and they are quite capable of appreciating the lessons they teach and the advantages they offer. The national increase of wealth has also affected the position of servants. People keep more servants than they used to keep ; and servants have less work to do. People live better than they used to live, and servants, as well as others, feel the mental uplifting that comes from rich and plentiful food.

But one of the main causes of trouble is, that a mistress even yet hires her servant with some ancient ideas about her inferiority. She forgets that servants read novels, and do fancy work, and

write lots of letters ; and that service can no longer be considered the humble labor of a lower for a superior being. Mistresses must now dismiss from their minds the idea of the old family servant they have learned to meet in novels ; they must cease to look upon service as in any way a family tie ; they must realize and practically acknowledge the fact that the relation between mistress and servant is now on a purely commercial basis—the modern servant being a person who takes a certain sum of money for the performance of certain duties. Indeed the condition has undergone just the same change as that which has taken place in the relation between the manufacturer and his artisans or between the contractor and his carpenters and masons.

It is true enough that servants take the money and do not perform the duties, or else perform them very badly. The manufacturer, the contractor, the merchant, all make the same complaint ; for independence and social freedom always step *before* fitness for these conditions, because the condition is necessary for the results, and the results are not the product of one generation. Surely Americans may bear their domestic grievances without much outcry, since they are altogether the consequences of education and progress, and are the circumstances which make possible much higher and better circumstances.

For just as soon as domestic service is authoritatively and publicly made a commercial bargain, and all other ideas eliminated from it, service will attract a much higher grade of women. The independent, fairly well-read American girl will not sell her labor to women who insist on her giving any part of her personality but the work of her hands. She feels interference in her private affairs to be an impertinence on any employer's part. She does not wish any mistress to take an interest in her, to advise, to teach, or reprove her. She objects to her employer being even what is called "friendly." All she asks is to know her duties and her hours, and to have a clear understanding as to her work and its payment. And when service is put upon this basis openly, it will draw to it many who now prefer the harder work, poorer pay, but larger independence, of factories.

Servants are a part of our social system, but our social system is being constantly changed and uplifted, and servants rise with it. I remember a time in England when servants who did not fulfil their year's contract were subject to legal punishment ;

when a certain quality of dress was worn by them, and those who over-dressed did so at the expense of their good name ; when they seldom moved to any situation beyond walking distance from their birthplace ; when, in fact, they were more slaves than servants. Would any good woman wish to restore service to this condition?

On the servant's part the root of all difficulty is her want of respect for her work ; and this, solely because her work has not yet been openly and universally put upon a commercial basis. When domestic service is put on the same plane as mechanical service, when it is looked upon as a mere business bargain, then the servant will not feel it necessary to be insolent and to do her work badly, simply to let her employer know how much she is above it. Much has been done to degrade service by actors, newspapers, and writers of all kinds giving to the domestic servant names of contempt as "flunkies," "menials," etc., etc. If such terms were habitually used regarding mechanics, we might learn to regard masons and carpenters with disdain. Yet domestic service is as honorable as mechanical service, and the woman who can cook a good dinner is quite as important to society as the man who makes the table on which it is served.

Yet, whether mistresses will recognize the change or not, service has in a great measure emancipated itself from feudal bonds. Servants have now a social world of their own, of which their mistresses know nothing at all. In it they meet their equals, make their friends, and talk as they desire. Without unions, without speeches, and without striking—because they can get what they want without striking—they have raised their wages, shortened their hours, and obtained many privileges. And the natural result is an independence,—which for lack of proper expression asserts itself by the impertinence and self-conceit of ignorance,—that has won more in tangible rights than in intangible respect.

Mistresses who have memories or traditions are shocked because servants do not acknowledge their superiority, or in any way reverence their "betters." But reverence for any earthly thing is the most un-American of attitudes. Reverence is out of date and offensively opposed to free inquiry. Parents do not exact it, and preachers do not expect it—the very title of "Rev." is now a verbal antiquity. Do we not even put our rulers through a course of hand-shaking in order to divest them of any respect

the office might bring ? Why then expect a virtue from servants which we do not practise in our own stations ?

It is said, truly enough, that servants think of nothing but dress. Alas, mistresses are in the same transgression ! This is the fault of machinery. When servants wore mob-caps and gingham, mistresses wore muslins and merinos, and were passing fine with one good silk dress. Machinery has made it possible for mistresses to get lots of dresses, and if servants are now fine and tawdry, it is because there is a general leaning that way. Servants were neat when every one else was neat.

To blame servants for faults we all share is really not reasonable. It must be remembered that women of all classes dress to make themselves attractive, and attractive mainly to the opposite sex. What the young ladies in the parlor do to make themselves beautiful to their lovers, the servants in the kitchen imitate. Both classes of young women are anxious to marry. There is no harm in this desire in either case. With the hopes of the young ladies we do not meddle ; why then interfere about nurse and the policeman : service is not an elysium under the most favorable circumstances. No girl gets fond of it, and a desire to be mistress of her own house—however small it may be—is not a very shameful kicking against Providence.

The carrying out of three points would probably revolutionize the whole condition of service :

First, The relation should be put upon an absolutely commercial basis ; and made as honorable as mechanical, or factory, or store service.

Second, Duties and hours should be clearly defined. There should be no interference in personal matters. There should be no more personal interest expected, or shown, than is the rule between any other employer and employee.

Third, If it were possible to induce yearly engagements, they should be the rule ; for when people know they have to put up with each other for twelve months, they are more inclined to be patient and forbearing ; they learn to make the best of each other's ways ; and bearing becomes liking, and habit strengthens liking, and so they go on, and on, and are pretty well satisfied.

AMELIA E. BARR.